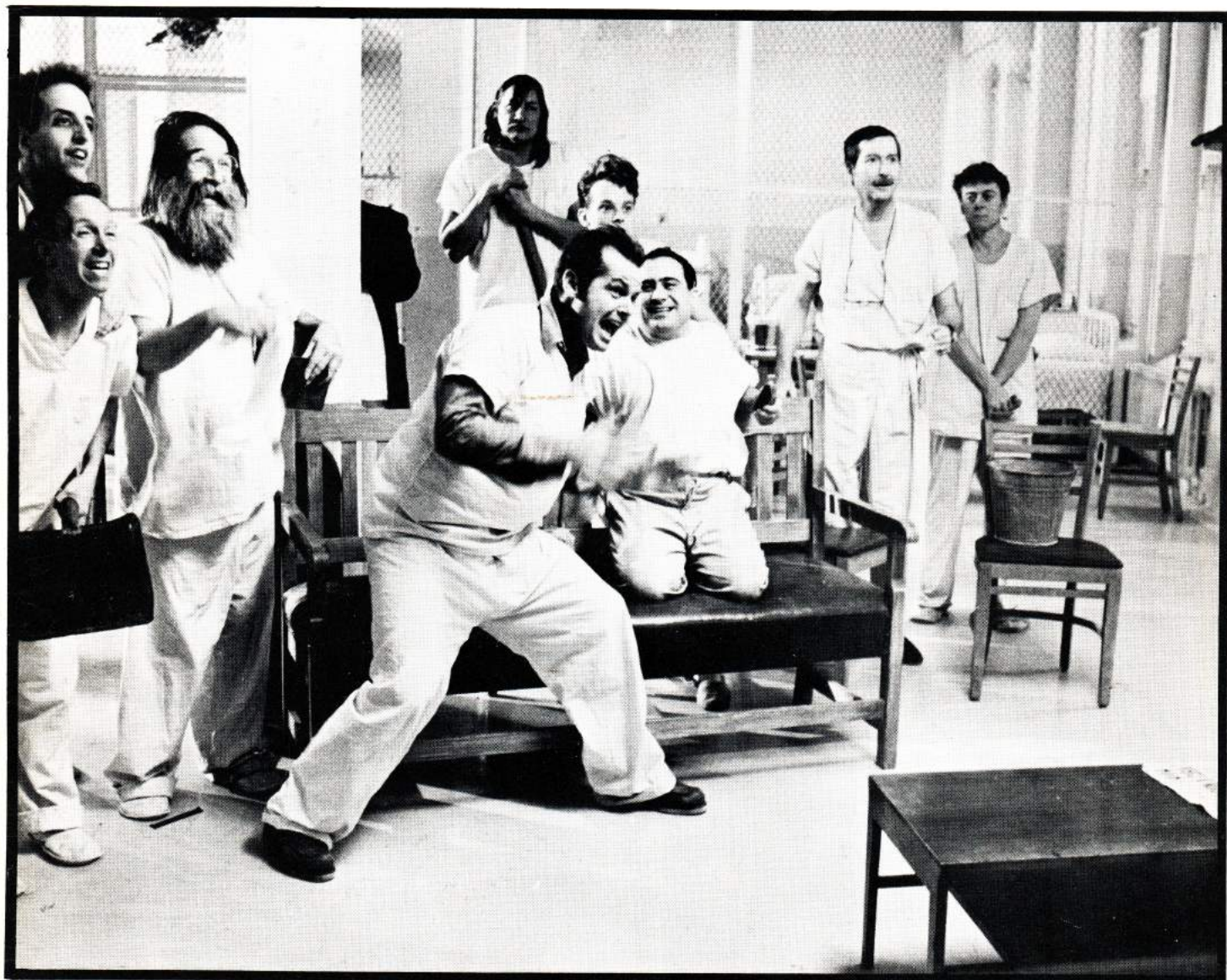


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Filmmakers

newsletter



ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

Interview With Director Milos Forman

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ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST—loosely adapted from Ken Kesey's novel—is a film about choice and what it means to make one. Arriving at a mental institution in the Oregon dusk, Randle Patrick McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) claims he's faking it to the others in the ward. Witty, dirty-minded, irreverent, enthusiastic, charming—he says he's just marking time. But sucked deeper and deeper into the milieu of the ward, which is under the iron supervision of Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher), and fascinated by the Indian, Chief Bromden (Will Sampson), McMurphy becomes a rescuer and eventually finds the price of choice.

Finally, his brain damaged by the electric shock treatments he's punished with, he doesn't make it. His lesson taught, his life is traded for the Indian's freedom. Saving McMurphy by killing him and then breaking out through the ward window, Chief Bromden runs into the Oregon dawn—to the accompaniment of the sounds of the bells Indians wear on their legs to dance.

The ward is both a metaphor and a world in which the question is posed—who is crazy and who is sane? Many of the men there are self-committed, and it is fascinating to watch the flaws appear. The group therapy sessions—presided over by "Big Nurse"—both interrupt the infinite time of the ward and reveal this world through the intimate look at its citizens. Milos Forman's greatest strength is this deep probing of people.

Forman's films are full of faces—and hands. In *CUCKOO'S NEST*, when McMurphy dies, the Chief's power resides in his hands. The choice to make it or not is in our hands, not machines, and Forman is showing us that it's possible.

Milos Forman, the director, is a strong-faced man. An inveterate pipe smoker, heavy set, slightly rumped. Extremely articulate and informal, the man seems to be a hard driver of himself. So too then of the men and women who work for him.

Born in 1932 in Czechoslovakia, he has been here in the United States now for six years. His English is still rough, but the ideas he expresses are lucid and well-formed. He comments that there are visually organized people who tell stories in a visual medium, and that the audience must respond to the gestalt of the image, its tone and certainly its dialogue; but Forman does not like characters who preach on camera. Through the characters on the screen Forman's vision is presented. We are asked to read into every image and from that devolve the totality of the scene—greater than the sum of its parts, only one of which is the words the actors speak.

Forman is concerned with objective reality—real trees, a real sky. But in his *mise-en-scene* there is immense detail against which culpable, enigmatic, selfish, hateful, loving people move. There is no good or evil *per se*, nor even

ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

An Interview With Director Milos Forman

by Larry Sturhahn

some balance in between; there just is! Forman's sensuous face also reflects some of this.

Milos Forman did three features before *CUCKOO'S NEST*: *LOVES OF A BLOND* (1965), *FIREMAN'S BALL* (1967), and *TAKING OFF* (1971). He was also one of the directors of *VISIONS OF EIGHT*, the film made on the Olympic Games in 1972.

LARRY STURHAHN: How did you get involved with *CUCKOO'S NEST*?

MILOS FORMAN: I was getting a lot of offers, scripts and books, and *CUCKOO'S NEST* was by far the most intelligent, interesting piece to come across my desk. There were a lot of things, from details to the overall philosophy of the book, that appealed to me tremendously. I have always liked stories which deal with individuals in conflict, against the so-called establishment. I'm touched by these kinds of stories. It's sort of a Czech film, a Czech book.

LS: I find that some people are verbal in nature and therefore attuned to writing, while others are more visually attuned to making pictures, to directing. Would you characterize yourself as one or the other?

MF: I started as a writer in Czechoslovakia: I studied to be a screenwriter and then began to direct my own screenplays. But I have always liked to collaborate on the script with someone; I have always needed some feedback. I guess I don't have enough discipline to sit down in my room and concentrate enough to play devil's advocate to myself.

In a film you are telling a story about people, but there is a big difference. The writer is mainly interested in what is going on inside the heads of the characters, so the whole story often becomes very verbal because it describes the mental process. But I have great difficulty in working with this kind of author. I like the author who is outside and observing people's behavior, discovering the inside of the characters by watching the surface.

LS: In *CUCKOO'S NEST* the ward is very real, very concrete. I felt your attempt visually was to present a very tangible world in front of which people were moving. Is that correct?

MF: As a spectator and, naturally, as a filmmaker, I like to reveal the inside through the surface. And that involves not destroying the surface but leaving the reality as it is. So the quality of photography is meant to give you the very real surface of things: the sky is real, the tree is real, the earth is real. The set you build, the people you see—nothing should strain your credibility.

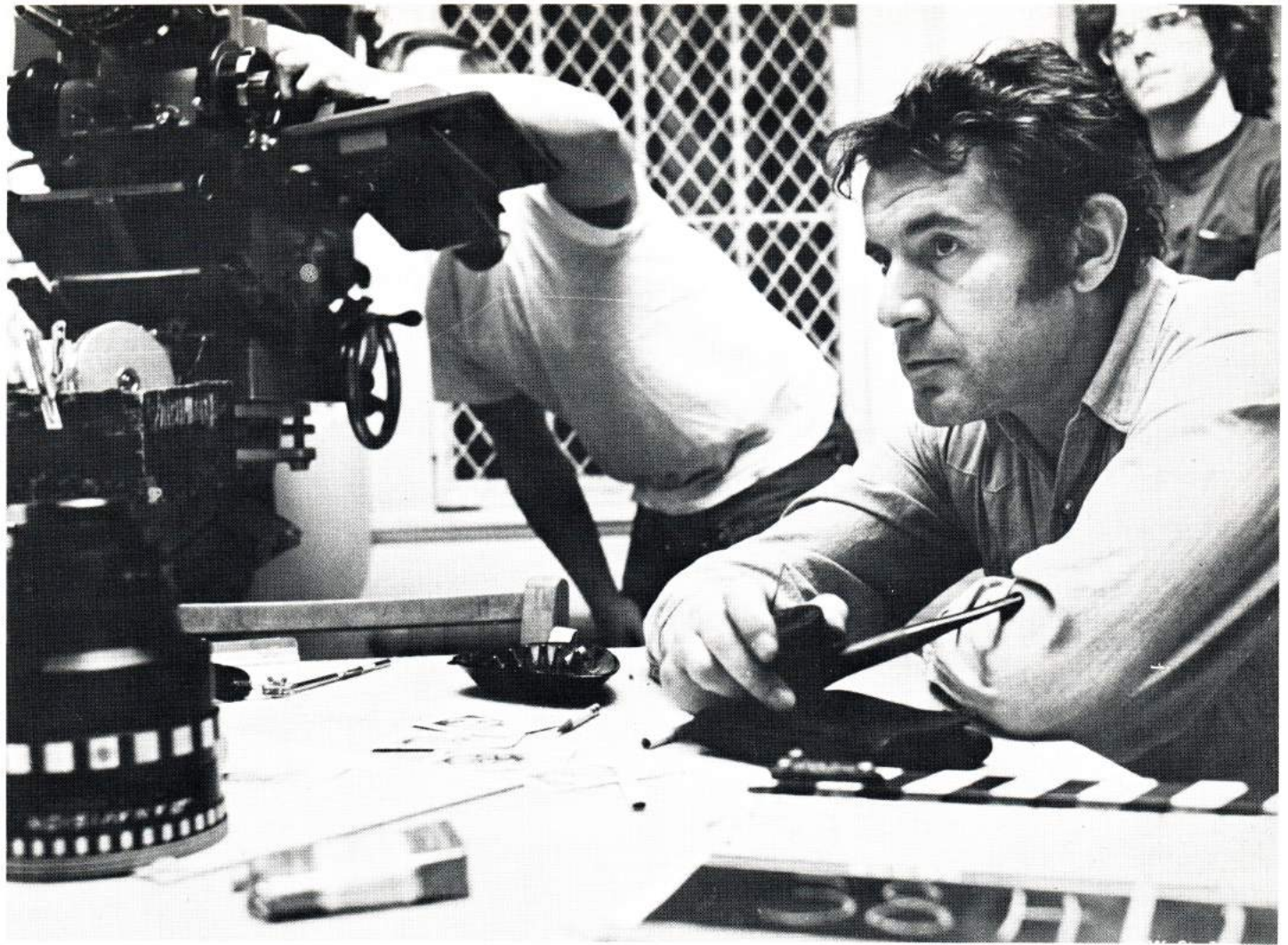
LS: Ondricek was your cameraman on a number of films in Europe. I'm interested in the relationship between you, a director whose consciousness of framing and the scene is very strong, and the cameraman.

MF: The relationship is a very crucial one because the cameraman must accommodate a lot of demands. If a director has a certain vision, so the cameraman has a certain vision too. Also, he must try to make everything easy—or as easy as possible—for the actors, who have a lot of burdens on them.

In *CUCKOO'S NEST* my first demand on the cameraman was that since most of the film takes place in the one ward, let's just build such a light set-up that it can be turned on with the flip of one switch and then we can start shooting. Because ultimately it's not the lights which the audience is watching on the screen; it's the people.

For example, in this film you have group session scenes where you have 9 actors sitting around. In this case, I wanted two cameras so the scene could run without any actor knowing whether or not he was on camera. That gave a certain kind of freedom, because no one knew for certain when he was the center of attention. On the other hand, it made them work all the way through because each felt he *could* be on camera at any moment.

Meanwhile, I am of course sitting



behind the cameramen with one camera on this actor and the other camera on that actor. But suddenly I see it's very interesting to watch a third actor, so I say, "Go, go, go, pan to that one." Well, on the rushes you might see a lot of garbage: the pan is too fast or not quite right; it takes a second or two to get the new man in focus, etc. You get a lot of stuff which from the cameraman's point of view is not perfect. And if he doesn't trust you, he's always scared: "Oh, Jesus Christ, I can't let him talk to my operators and make them do crazy things! What if he uses something which is lousy? I can't afford to have people see this even on the rushes!"

Every cameraman has a tendency to do his best, to give you the most perfect framing and the most perfect light possible. But perfection in this area can go against you and consequently against the actors. You must meet somewhere in between: *you* have to compromise—and *he* has to compromise. And for this you need a partner. You can't make a compromise with a computer or with someone who doesn't understand what you are talking about. So it's very important for me to work with a man who has his own head, his own eyes, and his own feelings, but who also has an open mind.

LS: How much of the film did you use

two cameras on?

MF: Just for that kind of scene. Where you have a big group and the action is long and practically everything happening has a certain kind of importance.

LS: How do you feel about the relationship of sound to this?

MF: I was very lucky with my sound crew, Larry Jost, Clint Althouse, and Jim Utterback. We didn't have one problem with the sound even though we were shooting in a real location inside the ward, and the building was right next to the road where cars were constantly coming and going. I may have looped ten lines in the whole picture, but all the rest was usable sound. Perfect sound.

A great soundman is also great because he has a great team; and a good boom man can be very important because he must really follow the scene and anticipate who is going to open his mouth next—especially when you start to improvise. The soundman was great because as soon as I started to rehearse he was there; and after we shot, it was on the screen.

LS: I had the impression from the film that basically you edit in the camera.

MF: When you have a sequence which has a very exact action, you know exactly how to cover it because you *can't* cover it any

other way. You know it perfectly beforehand. Then one camera is absolutely enough, and you can edit in the camera. But the scenes I mentioned before—where many things are going on at the same time—can't be edited in the camera because you'd probably lose a lot of the good moments.

LS: How does this tie in with the idea of also using non-professional actors?

MF: Non-professional people demand much more camera flexibility because they do more unexpected things.

LS: Who sets the framing? You or the cameraman?

MF: I set the framing first. Then, if he disagrees, he makes a counter suggestion.

LS: But the composition of the film is yours? That goes back to what we said about being visual.

MF: Right.

LS: In a review of *TAKING OFF*, Penelope Gilliat of the "New Yorker" said you were "gentle to your characters." How do you feel about that?

MF: That has nothing to do with the actors; that's in the script. In telling a story, you must take a certain attitude—one which is outraged, or perhaps subdued, or whatever. You can be gentle to your characters or you can be very nasty to your characters.

LS: How did you go about casting?

MF: That's number one. In the end, 90% of telling the story is the people on the screen. And you must be right there. If you are wrong, you can be a genius director and they can be genius actors, but it still won't be good.

When you read the book and then work on the script you have a certain idea of what the character is and how he should look, so you search for people who fit physically and psychologically. You know also that any actor will bring, consciously or subconsciously, part of his own personality to the role. *Persona* is very important. For CUCKOO'S NEST we saw about 900 actors.

LS: You saw 900 actors? And there are maybe 35 roles?

MF: We did such an extensive search for actors because it's an ensemble piece with 15 important characters. I personally hate to see a film where I confuse the actors because they look alike! So I couldn't afford to have 2 or 3 similar-looking people because the audience would be confused. We wanted to be able to distinguish every single character just by the way he looks.

We spent 10 to 15 minutes with everybody to get some idea of their *persona*. Some actors who knew it was a film about crazies came in and started acting crazy thinking that would impress us. But you have to forget about this and try to figure out what kind of personality he is without his act.

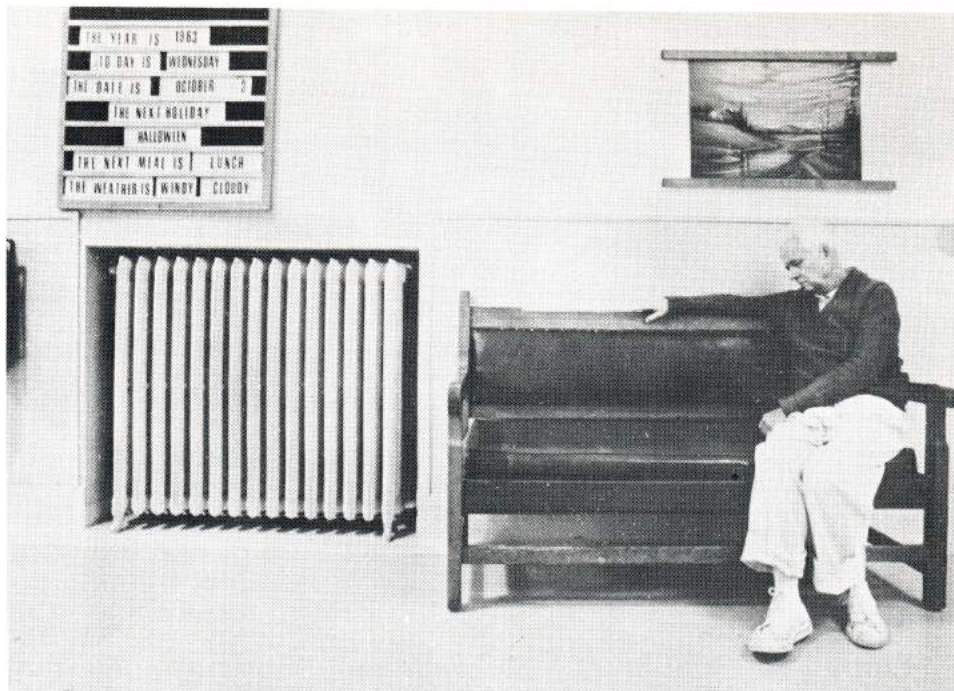
We ended up with 100 and then started to have brief readings between small groups and learned even more. It's funny, but you know immediately whether or not the actor is right. After you work a little, you can feel the rapport—how the actor is responding to you, how well he understands the way you work, what kind of relation you will have.

LS: Suppose after this detailed search and sorting-out process you find you have an actor who is not playing the part as you wish. What do you do about that?

MF: On every film you make some mistake, and that very thing happened to me on this film. Well, first you try to simplify everything to fit the actor's personality; you try not to ask him to do things he can't handle. Perhaps you even change the character so it will be more feasible for the actor to perform without being nervous. Or you may just change the performance in the editing.

LS: I felt Jack Nicolson was perfect, absolutely perfect, for the role of McMurphy. How did you decide on him?

MF: In the book the physical description of McMurphy is totally different, and of course your first thoughts are influenced by that vision—a huge man with red hair and a macho kind of personality. Then we also wanted to have a name, a star, because we felt it would be very good for the film since the film is about *us*, you and me, entering an unknown world. It seemed a good idea to have McMurphy be



The spirit of the mental institutions's Ward 34B.



The men of Ward 34B.



McMurphy and Chief Bromden await special treatment for being disruptive.



McMurphy and Chief Bromden after the electric shock has been administered.

someone with whom we could identify, someone we knew. Jack Nicholson is that somebody who could enter the unknown world of the mental institution where everyone else was an unknown.

LS: The part of Chief Bromden was also perfectly cast. But I gather he was an unknown, and not an actor either.

MF: In his case we were very lucky to find a big man who was an Indian and a good actor, although he was actually a rodeo rider. We had asked some connections in New Mexico and Utah to look for a 6 foot 5 Indian for us, but the results were zero. Then one day Mel Lambert, who knows all the Northwest Indians and even speaks some Indian languages, told us he had seen the biggest son of a bitch we ever saw!

Jack Nicholson was flying up with me to see the hospital and meet the superintendent so we went to some kind of cocktail lounge to meet this guy. Suddenly the door opened and this *huge* man came in! I really got excited, but there was still a question as to whether or not this guy could do it.

The first thing I learned was that he was very intelligent, which was encouraging because that's a big help in acting. Then I did a short reading with him and found him very responsive. But even after we decided to use him I was still a little nervous because he developed this feeling of great intensity toward the part he was going to play in the movie and started trying to push the importance of the character. Finally it was beer that helped: after a few beers he would be more receptive to my demands.

LS: To go back to your concept of an actor's persona: I noticed a strong concern with hands.

MF: Faces and hands tell you the most about what's going on inside. Hands are the physical extension of your mind. Watch someone's hands and you will see they are really doing things they are completely unaware of. For instance, we all use our hands to explain ourselves better. Of course American people often have a Scotch in their hands, which limits their gestures.

LS: I believe you've been in the United States 6 years now. But *TAKING OFF*, your first film, was done when you'd been here only a year and a half.

MF: And I still felt a little shaky about the language at that time because my English was worse than it is now. Language and the way people talk had always been very important to me in my Czech films; but suddenly I wasn't hearing the nuances. I was lucky in having Buck Henry at that time: after every take I'd just glance at him. But I soon learned it's the melody of the language that you can judge accurately. Sometimes in *CUCKOO'S NEST* Jack might make a remark I didn't understand, some real slang, but immediately the melody of the line would tell me whether or not it fit.

I like dialogue, although I don't like discussions on the screen. I like people *talk*-

ing; but I don't like people discussing problems or philosophy. I think music communicates the philosophy of a scene better than words.

LS: Music seems to be enormously important in your films. The language is music, the scene is music, the scene is choreographed. Do you move your actors to some kind of rhythm?

MF: In certain scenes, yes. I know pretty well before I start shooting where I want what kind of music—even if not exactly. So I choose the music before the scene is made. First we play the music and then the camera starts rolling; but before the first word, the music stops. The reason for this is so that people will have the rhythm in their blood as they go through the whole take.

LS: Did you shoot in continuity?

MF: Yes, for the most part. Shooting in continuity enables you to stay open to whatever new things come up because you can take it into account in later scenes.

LS: What about scheduling?

MF: I always make sure the schedule is right, and I know that when I go through the script. If something needs 10 weeks and they come to you and say you have to do it in 6 weeks, then you have to rewrite the script; if they say you have 12 weeks, then I say, "Great! Let's do it in 12 weeks."

I am usually pretty accurate about it. And calm—a few days ahead or behind schedule doesn't bother me. To go substantially behind schedule makes me nervous, but I don't blame the producer because it was me who upset the schedule. I accept it as my duty to be more or less on time.

LS: As a director, you like to have a set that's calm and friendly.

MF: Definitely. I like it if everybody's more or less happy and excited about what we are doing. I also like to create the impression that I am worried so the others will say, "No, no. Don't worry. We'll do anything so that everything will be just fine."

I mean that mainly about the crew. The actors have so much insecurity they always need to feel you like what they are doing—and I'm very happy to give them that. Deep down I admire actors. I did it myself, and I always felt very, very uncomfortable in front of the cameras. It made me sweat and stutter. So I admire anybody who can be in front of the camera and live.

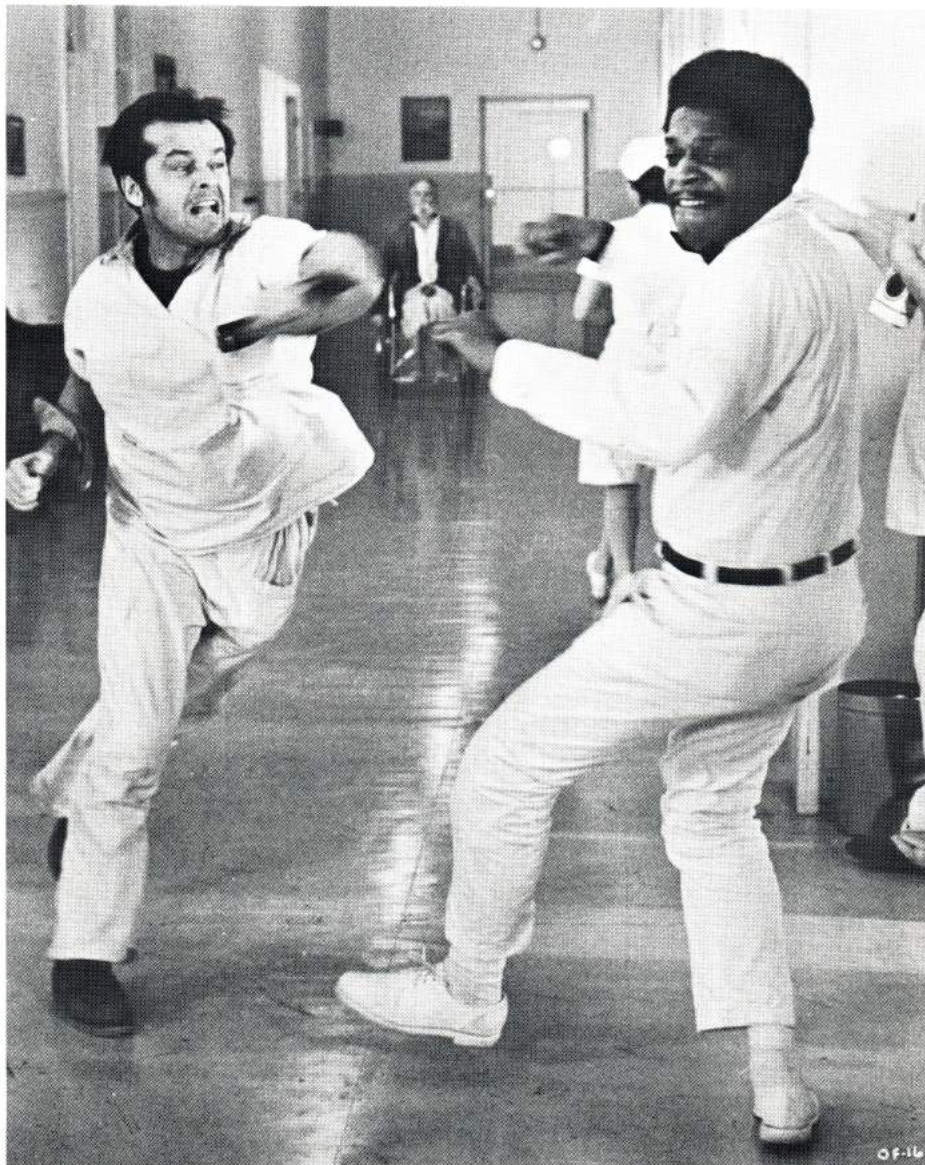
Of course you always want the technical crew to work fast because that gives you more time to spend with your actors. But you also have to respect your crew's needs; you can only push to a certain point. This is the first film where I can say, *without exception*, thank you to everybody on the crew.

LS: How closely do you work with the editors?

MF: I would rather not have the film touched unless I am sitting right there. Which doesn't mean I don't want the editor's opinion. But during the shooting I



McMurphy and Nurse Ratched confront each other across the glass partition of her office.



McMurphy strikes orderly Washington (Nathan George) in an explosion of violence.



McMurphy and Candy (Marya Small) at a clandestine party given for the ward.



During a recreational period, McMurphy tries to interest Chief Bromden in basketball.

have been working with a certain idea, so it's in my mind. If I arrive and they show me a scene which was edited without my being there, it can sometimes be so different from my original intention that it just confuses me. Even if it's good, it's not what I had in mind.

When we finished *CUCKOO'S NEST* I sat down with the editor and went over all the material. Before we began to cut I wanted to see the whole scene in rushes, start from the basic idea and then find out when the material was going to resist and need to go some other way.

LS: You see it just as it was shot? Then part of your directorial concept is following the film to its ending: you help create the music, you create the scenes, etc. They are your films and you are the prime mover.

MF: They have from me whatever I am able to give. That's the magic of film. You're always getting things you didn't anticipate—and sometimes something marvelous.

LS: I had the impression from *CUCKOO'S NEST* that you love people and weren't trying to show ogres and monsters but real people with faults and virtues and problems and loves.

MF: I have never met anyone who walked up to me and said, "Watch out, I'm a very bad person." Everybody thinks about himself in good terms—for instance, I think that I'm a very good person. It is the circumstances which make some of us, objectively, do things which are considered harmful.

So I start with the assumption that everyone is good and then say, "Ok, now let's watch everybody." When the film is over, the audience can judge who was right and who was wrong. Nixon, Stalin—I'm sure these men were convinced they were doing the best from all points of view, including the moral point of view, and that is always the main subject of art.

For instance, take *Nurse Ratched*. She believes deeply that she is doing right. And that is where the real drama begins for me. That's much more frightening than if you have an evil person who knows he's doing wrong. If you stand up to people who know they are doing wrong, they will back down because they don't have belief behind them. But people who do wrong while they believe they are doing good—they can break your neck. They are fanatics!

LS: So you let the audience make the final judgment?

MF: And hope they will not make the wrong judgment.

LS: What I'm aiming at is a moral question. You run the risk of turning an audience on to an idea which may be . . .

MF: I think we have a tendency to overestimate the power of art. A director is very powerful during the two hours when people are watching the film. But the moment they leave the theater the film is just one of millions of experiences which form people's opinions.